Psychology

Robert A. Wilson

Genetics and the biological sciences are the two contemporary scientific fields most readily called to mind in thinking about science and eugenics. Yet the history of another discipline, psychology, is enmeshed more intricately with eugenics than are the histories of either genetics or even the biological sciences more generally. This is true of the history of eugenics in Canada. Moreover, continuities in the roles that psychology plays in how we think about sorts of people and their ability and right to parent make psychology's eugenic past relevant to reflection on contemporary and ongoing practices and policies.

1879 and All That: The Standard Tale

The psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus once famously quipped that psychology has a short history but a long past. That short history is often traced to at least two landmarks events that constitute a long-standing origin myth about psychology (Wilson 2004, ch.2).

The first of these was the foundation of the first experimental laboratory devoted to the study of psychological phenomena by Wilhelm Wundt in the German city of Leipzig in 1879. Following several decades of work in psychophysics and perceptual physiology, the founding of Wundt's laboratory was significant because of its designation as a distinctly experimental psychological space.

Coincident with the establishment of this laboratory space was Ebbinghaus's own introduction of nonsense syllables as stimuli to probe the nature and limits of human memory, and the philosopher William James's teaching of the putatively first course in psychology at Harvard as a newly appointed professor of philosophy.

The second event was the appearance of James's Principles of Psychology, published barely ten years later in 1890. Here James begins by identifying psychology as the “science of mental life, both of its phenomena and their conditions”, and the lengthy two volumes that follow are sufficiently detailed and convincing to lead to their being adopted as both research monograph and textbook in the new field that they helped to create. For both Wundt and James, the new science shared something with physiology and psychophysics, but it was to define it's own distinct domain, leading to an autonomous, experimental science of the mind: psychology.

On this view, the discipline of psychology emerged somewhere between physiology and philosophy as the science of mental life, and it was to be explored by blending together the experimental techniques of physiology that had come to inform psychophysics with the distinctive introspective methodology pioneered by Wundt and James. At the centre of this emerging discipline are perceptual and cognitive phenomena—ranging from our discriminatory sensory abilities through to our capacity to remember the past and plan for the future.

Constructing Psychology, Constructing the Individual

In contrast to this view, the historian of psychology Kurt Danziger and the sociologist Nikolas Rose paint a different picture of psychology's “short history”. For Danziger (1990), central to psychology's founding were not simply key events but certain ways of “constructing the individual”, of abstracting away from individual agents in situ to render them appropriate for a distinctive kind of study of the mind.

For Rose (1985), influenced by Foucault's work on discipline and disciplining, psychology's origins are better understood through the ways in which its professional credibility was established, gaining social recognition within both universities and other institutional settings, including prisons, asylums, and schools.

Rose views psychology primarily as an applied science, one focused on the psychology of the individual, on “specific mental capacities and attributes of human individuals”, particularly with “the variation of these capacities and attributes among individuals and the causes and consequences of such variations” (Rose 1985, p.5). As Danziger points out, this construction of the individual varied across different influential figures in late 19th-century psychology. Wundt's individuals, for example, needed to be careful observers of their own mental states under conditions that moved them from beyond-experiment contagion in order to generate intra-subjective agreement over repeated trials. For this reason, Wundt and his trained research assistants were the primary research subjects in his experimental work, and they were to be tested in abstraction from their idiosyncratic life histories and social contexts in the name of objectivity.

Galton's Individuals

Sir Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, was another influential such figure in psychology's founding, though one often omitted or sidelined in the discipline’s traditional histories. Galton's individuals were very much subjects not so much of experimentation as of mental testing, a kind of probing of the individual that aimed to uncover the inherent level of mental ability and innate tendencies that each individual possessed.

Galton believed that mental characteristics should be treated just like bodily characteristics, and that their putative heritability—their tendency to “run in families”—implied that they could be selected for

or against in a population. Galton was very much inspired by the theory of natural selection, seeing in Darwin's appeal to artificial selection early in his On The Origin of Species much potential in the case of human beings. Thus, Galton not only advocated for continuities between physical and mental characteristics, but also for the utility of artificial intervention in human breeding based on successes in the animal and plant kingdoms. Galton thought of mental abilities as innate biological propensities of individuals. Yet because of his interest in variation, Galton was less interested in intensive experimental or clinical exploration than in locating them in some aggregation of individual test performances that could be analyzed statistically (Wilson 2004, ch.2).

The Place of Psychology in the History of Eugenics

Galton's early psychological interests in what he called “hereditary genius” (Galton 1869) are most naturally tied to a program of positive eugenics, whereby those with desirable traits are encouraged to reproduce “their kind”. But the statistical techniques and the selectionist edge to Galton's population thinking immediately drew the attention of those focused on the other side of the Bell Curve that Galton helped to make famous: the feeble-minded or mentally deficient. With the deployment of eugenic thinking in the context of the asylum, the mental hospital, the training school for the feeble-minded, and the prison, psychology was pressed in to service to identify sometimes masked defects of mind, feeble-mindedness and insanity.

In Great Britain, intelligence testing came to prominence through the work of two psychologists, Charles Spearman (1904) and Cyril Burt (1909), both strongly influenced by Galton. This role for psychology became even more pronounced in the first decade of the twentieth-century in North America, as intelligence testing found fertile ground

in the eugenics movement in the United States. Such testing made its way from its origins in France in the work of Binet and Simon through Henry Goddard's translation of Binet's intelligence test from French into English in 1908. Goddard, superintendent of the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey, went on in 1910 to coin the term “moron” for high-grade mental defectives with borderline intelligence, making them a particular target for eugenic segregation and sterilization. He advanced the extreme view that feeble-mindedness was at the root of the social problems of crime, alcoholism, prostitution, and poverty, and advocated passionately for the detection, familial removal, and institutionalization of feeble-minded children and for a key role for intelligence testing in doing so (Goddard 1914, esp. ch.1 and ch.10).

The integration of intelligence testing into the eugenics movement created a central place for psychologists in the diagnosis, schooling, housing, treatment, and control of those deemed “feeble-minded”. For this reason, Rose's term psycho-eugenics appropriately gestures at the central role that psychology has played in the history of eugenics.

Conclusion

In thinking about new forms that eugenics might take, attention is readily drawn to reproductive technologies, the uses and abuses of biological knowledge in regulating parenting decisions, and the continuing dehumanization of people with disabilities, especially intellectual disabilities. Psychological knowledge and technologies, such as intelligence tests, which played such a large role in the history of eugenics in practice in both Europe and North America, remain very much with us, however, particularly in the classification of children and of parents as incapable of "intelligent parenthood". We might turn to the case of Alberta as a way to illustrate this point about psychology, its history, eugenics, and their joint legacy.

John MacEachran, whose academic training was primarily (like William James) as a philosopher, but who also spent part of a year studying with Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, served as the chair of Alberta's Eugenics Board from its founding in 1928 until 1965. He founded the Department of Philosophy, later the Department of Philosophy and Psychology, at the University of Alberta in 1909, and served as its chair, a well as Provost of the university, until 1945. In his few publications, MacEachran advocated for eugenic sterilization, drawing on his status as a philosopher and psychologist in doing so, and often described children whose cases he viewed as a member of the eugenics board as both mentally deficient and as incapable of intelligent parenthood.

Judgments about a person's intelligence that formed part of the basis both of these classifications continue to inform contemporary decisions about parenting and family life in Alberta and elsewhere. For example, approximately one-third of children born to parents with intellectual disability will be placed permanently out-of-home by child and youth protection authorities (McConnell et al. 2011).

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